The Pagan Library

Looking At Yourself

Anon

SYSOP'S NOTE: This excellent food-for-thought was downloaded from EarthRite BBS, 415-651-9496. - Talespinner, Sysop, WeirdBase

Before you go a step further, take a good long look at your desires, motivation and skills. What role do you see yourself playing in this new group? "Ordinary" member? Democratic facilitator? High Priestess? And if the last - why do you want the job?

The title of High Priestess and Priestess are seductive, conjuring up exotic images of yourself in embroidered robes, a silver crescent (or horned helm) on your brow, adoring celebrants hanging on every word which drops from your lips...

Reality check. The robes will be stained with wine and candle wax soon enough, and not every word you speak is worth remembering. A coven leader's job is mostly hard work between rituals and behind the scene. It is not always a good place to act out your fantasies, because the lives and well-being of others are involved, and what is flattering or enjoyable to you man not be in their best interest. So consider carefully.

If your prime motive is establishing a coven is to gain status and ego gratification, other people will quickly sense that. If they are intelligent, independent individuals, they will refuse to play Adoring Disciple to your Witch Queen impressions. They will disappear, and that vanishing act will be the last magick they do with you.

And if you do attract a group ready to be subservient Spear Carriers in your fantasy drama - well, do you really want to associate with that kind of personality? What are you going to do when you want someone strong around to help you or teach you, and next New Moon you look out upon a handful of Henry Milquetoasts and Frieda Handmaidens? If a person is willing to serve you, the they will also become dependent on you, drain your energy, and become disillusioned if you ever let down the Infallible Witch Queen mask for even a moment.

Some other not-so-great reasons for starting a coven: a) because it seems glamorous, exotic, and a little wicked; b) because it will shock your mother, or c) because you can endure your boring, flunky job more easily if you get to go home and play Witch at night.

Some better reasons for setting up a coven, and even nomination yourself as High Priest/ess, include: a) you feel that you will be performing a useful job for yourself and others; b) you have enjoyed leadership roles in the past, and proven yourself capable; or c) you look forward to learning and growing in the role.

Even with the best motives in the world, you will still need to have - or quickly develop - a whole range of skills in order to handle a leadership role. If you are to be a facilitator of a study group, group process insights and skills are important.

These include:

1. Gatekeeping, or guiding discussion in such a way that everyone has an opportunity to express ideas and opinions;
2. Summarizing and clarifying;
3. Conflict resolution, or helping participants understand points of disagreement and find potential solutions which respect everyone's interests;
4. Moving the discussion toward consensus, or at any rate decision, by identifying diversions and refocusing attention on goals and priorities; and
5. Achieving closure smoothly when the essential work is completed, or an appropriate stopping place is reached.

In addition to group process skills, four other competencies necessary to the functioning of a coven are: ritual leadership, administration, teaching, and counseling. In a study group the last one may not be considered a necessary function, and the other three may be shared among all participants. But in a coven the leaders are expected to be fairly capable in all these areas, even if responsibilities are frequently shared or delegated. Let us look briefly at each.

Ritual leadership involves much more that reading invocations by candlelight. Leaders must understand the powers they intend to manipulate: how they are raised, channeled and grounded. They must be adept at designing rituals which involve all the sensory modes. They should have a repertoire of songs and chants, dances and gestures or mudras, incense and oils, invocations and spells, visual effects and symbols, meditations and postures; and the skill to combine these in a powerful, focused pattern. They must have clarity of purpose and firm ethics. And they must understand timing: both where a given ritual fits in the cycles of the Moon, the Wheel of the Year, and the dance of the spheres, and how to pace the ritual once started, so that energy peaks and is channeled at the perfect moment. And they must understand the Laws of Magick, and the correspondences, and when ritual is appropriate and when it is not.

By administration, we refer to basic management practices necessary to any organization. These include apportioning work fairly, and following up on its progress; locating resources and obtaining them (information, money, supplies); fostering communications (by telephone, printed schedules, newsletters etc.); and keeping records (minutes, accounts, Witch Book entries, or ritual logbook). Someone or several someone's has to collect the dues if any, buy the candles, chill the wine, and so forth.

Teaching is crucial to both covens and study groups. If only one person has any formal training or experience in magick, s/he should transmit that knowledge in a way which respects the intuitions, re-emerging past life skills, and creativity of the others. If several participants have some knowledge in differing areas, they can all share the teaching role. If no one in the group has training and you are uncertain where to begin, they you may need to call on outside resources: informed and ethical priest/esses who can act as visiting faculty, or who are willing to offer guidance by telephone or correspondence. Much can be gleaned from books, or course - assuming you know which books are trustworthy and at the appropriate level - but there is no substitute for personal instruction for some things. Magick can be harmful if misused, and an experienced practitioner can help you avoid pitfalls as well as offering hints and techniques not found in the literature.

Counseling is a special role of the High Priest/ess. It is assumed that all members of a coven share concern for each other's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual welfare, and are willing to help each other out in practical ways. However, coven leaders are expected to have a special ability to help coveners explore the roots of their personal problems and choose strategies and tactics to overcome them. This is not to suggest that one must be a trained psychoanalyst; but at the least, good listening skills, clear thinking and some insight into human nature are helpful. Often, magickal skills such as guided visualization, Tarot counseling and radiesthesia (pendulum work) are valuable tools as well.

Think carefully about your skills in these areas, as you have demonstrated them in other organizations. Ask acquaintances or co-workers, who can be trusted to give you a candid opinion, how they see you in some of these roles. Meditate, and decide what you really want for yourself in organizing the new group. Will you be content with being a catalyst and contact person - simply bringing people with a common interest together, then letting the group guide its destiny from that point on? Would you rather be a facilitator, either for the first months or permanently: a low-key discussion leader who enables the group to move forward with a minimum of misunderstanding and wasted energy? Or do you really want to be High Priestess - whatever that means to you - and serve as the guiding spirit and acknowledged leader of a coven? And if you do want that job, exactly how much authority and work do you envision as part of it? Some coven leaders want a great deal of power and control; others simply take an extra share of responsibility for setting up the rituals (whether or not they actually conduct the rites), and act as "magickal advisor" to less experienced members. Thus the High Priest/ess can be the center around which the life of the coven revolves, or primarily an honorary title, or anything in between.

That is one area which you will need to have crystal-clear in your own mind before the first meeting (of if you are flexible, at least be very clear that you are). You must also be clear as to your personal needs on other points: program emphasis, size, meeting schedule, finances, degree of secrecy, and affiliation with a tradition or network.

You owe it to prospective members and to yourself to make your minimum requirements known from the outset: it can be disastrous to a group to discover that members have major disagreements on these points after you have been meeting for six months.

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